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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000551

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

E. O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: POLICE QUESTION BUILDER AS CHURCH CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES

REF: HCMC 0520

1. (SBU) Mr. Le Van Dung, unofficial contractor for a Protestant house church currently under construction in HCMC's District 2 (reftel), met with police this morning in response to a third invitation to discuss his activities at the site. The first invitation, delivered June 9, summoned him to discuss the "illegal construction of a house church." The other two invitations dropped the reference to any particular activities, so Mr. Dung decided "to accept".

2. (SBU) A long-time ConGen Protestant contact, claiming to be the legal representative of the new church, accompanied Mr. Dung to the nearby offices of the local police investigative unit at 8:30 a.m. local time on June 17. While police prevented him from sitting with his "client" during the 90-minute interview, the contact was able to overhear the questioning from a vantage point less than five yards away. He said the police concentrated almost entirely on Mr. Dung's background -- family, education, and prior work experience -- rather than on current efforts to build the house church. Mr. Dung signed a report of the meeting before returning to his home. As he departed, police said they would soon tear down the house church.

3. (SBU) While construction continues unabated, efforts are hampered by an inadequate supply of construction materials and a lack of experienced workers. A handful of undercover police officers maintain their watch over the project, but have not interfered with the workers or the structure. During a recent meeting to be reported septel, HCMC People's Committee Vice Chairman Nguyen Van Dua told Consul General there is no regulation allowing construction to proceed if local authorities fail to respond to a building permit application within a specified timeframe. In other words, there is no such thing as "tacit approval." He did, however, acknowledge real problems in enforcing regulations to prevent illegal construction in HCMC.

4. (SBU) Comment: This pastors vs. the police standoff has been going on for over a week now. If the pastors are hoping to make a point about religious freedom by engaging in construction without a building permit, their assumption that they have some form of "tacit approval" (reftel) may not, in fact, help their case. Post will continue to monitor the situation.

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